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KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

CASE STUDY

Religious Leader Takes a Lead Role in Improving Maternal and Child Health

Imam Abdinazar educates more than 2,000 community members how to better care for their families.



Photo: Mahabbat Alymkulova, USAID

“By explaining how to recognize dangerous symptoms in a sick child and how to care for a pregnant woman, I am wishing wellness for others as I would have them wish for me and my family.”

- Imam Abdinazar.

Telling Our Story

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Challenge

Imam Abdinazar is a thirty year old father of two sons . He has worked as the assistant head of the oblast kazyat (“state” administration) in Jalalabad for three years. In February 2004, he participated in a health promotion seminar conducted by the USAID Child Survival Project, implemented by Project HOPE. The project strives to reduce the high rate of maternal and child mortality in two pilot rayons (“counties”) in southern Jalalabad Oblast. Jalalabad is known for its dense population (over 900,000 people), poverty, and malnutrition. Among the lessons that the Child Survival Project taught Abdinazar were that in the event that his sons experience a fever higher than 38.5 C, he needs to urgently seek medical care; and that while pregnant, his wife needs to eat meat regularly in order to get sufficient iron for herself and their unborn child. Abdinazar was most surprised to hear about the adverse nutritional effects of drinking tea immediately after a meal; tea actually blocks the absorption of iron, which can cause anemia. He found all these tips important enough to share with his community. So Imam Abdinazar decided to reach out to Jalalabad’s Islamic residents . Jalalabad has 440 mosques and six medresses (two female and four male). Each mosque is attended by approximately 1,000 parishioners every Friday.

Initiative

Impressed by USAID’s seminar, Imam Abdinazar decided to take the initiative to organize similar seminars in Jalalabad’s Bazar-Korgon district for local mosque imams and 900 parishioners. The training events presented information on family planning, preventing sexually transmitted disease, and on organizing transportation for individuals in need of immediate health care in areas where there is no regular ambulance service. During the trainings his audience –entirely male- listened carefully to the young imam and paid particular attention when he supplemented the health information with teachings from the Qur’an. This culturally relevant teaching method held the interest of the men in attendance, most of whom are the heads of their families and their primary decision-makers. The men also received brochures to take home and to place in their mosque libraries for the benefit of others.

Results

At present, six seminars , each lasting two hours , have been incorporated into the curricula of the six medresses and almost 2,000 people have been introduced to basic health concepts . In the future, Imam Abdinazar would like to train four volunteers who will regularly visit the mosques and medresses in his oblast to educate men how to properly care for their pregnant wives, how to recognize dangerous symptoms of illness in a child, how to practice family planning, and many other vitally needed health subjects.